

## **Expert Witness Report**

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**United States v. Georgianna A.M. Giampietro.**

### **Background**

I was born and raised in Syria. When I was a teenager, in the 1990s, I spent my summer breaks herding sheep from sunrise to sunset.

My family had two lines of business at the time, farming and livestock trading, so we did relatively well financially. We owned livestock and had an orchard that was leased annually to merchants from Aleppo, who arrived at harvest time to ship the produce from several orchards in the area to their city. Along with my eight siblings, I helped in farming and herding not only over the summer but on weekends and holidays throughout the year. I didn't venture outside my home village until 1996, after finishing the ninth-grade. At that point, I went to the nearby city of Albu Kamal to study at the area's high school.

My birth village, Ash Sha'fa, lies on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, in the province of Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria. The Iraqi border is only a short drive from the village. Most of Deir Ezzor's population descends from one main Arab Sunni tribe, the Egaidat, to which my family belongs. Like most tribes in the Middle East, the Egaidat has members in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

This eastern region is distinctly tribal, rural, and marginalized. In the 1990s, life there was generally simple and uneventful. The state's presence was minimal, and villagers sustained themselves through farming and remittances from relatives working in the Persian Gulf. I saw no indication then that my home province would become the main transit hub for jihadists moving from Syria into Iraq after the 2003 invasion, which was the main stronghold for al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra from 2011 until mid-2014, and then the site of the Islamic State's final battle as a caliphate, which had lasted from mid-2014 to the spring of 2019.

As someone who now studies jihadism for a living, my knowledge of militant groups and their ideologies is shaped by such close proximity to the intellectual and geographical "soil" that gave rise to such organizations, direct exposure to these groups and individuals, and the academic as well as professional training I obtained over the years. Too many of those who study jihadism today do so from a distance, with little knowledge of their ideology and the terrain in which these groups operate.

I went through all the levels of the country's school system and higher education apart from post-graduate levels. The Arabic language is the official language of learning in our school system, which includes religious studies as part of the curriculum from

elementary school to the university level. Thus, knowledge of the religious basis of what jihadis preach was not something I had to learn at a later stage in my life. It was part of my experience growing up to know about the religious and conceptual foundations of these movements -- just without the extremist and violent interpretations that jihadis embrace and impose on others.

Several people I knew closely during my schooling became rebels and jihadis when war came to Syria after 2011, and before that time in Iraq. I attended the University of Damascus in the Syrian capital from 2000 to 2004. It was during this same period that some individuals who later became jihadi leaders were studying in the same university. I was familiar then with their close circles, if not directly with some of them and their activities. Those individuals who were in Damascus when I was there included two of the founders and leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra, currently known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham; they also included many more from several anti-government groups that operated in the country in the past decade.

Members of these circles explained to me at the time, for example, how they would evade the watchful eyes of the Syrian security services to obtain banned books sold or distributed underground. Such books were banned officially by the Syrian government for their extremist content. One such book was Milestones by Egyptian Islamist intellectual Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966 after being accused of plotting to assassinate the then-president Gamal Abdelnasser. In the book, Qutb draws a roadmap for Islamic radicals to establish an Islamic state, based on a set of principles and actions that include rejecting the foundations of modern states, the legitimacy of existing governments and governance system, and the need for the return to the very beginnings of Islam in the 7th century to re-establish supremacy over the world.

The time I moved from my village to Damascus was a transformative time for Syria and the region. The country had a new president in 2000 when I began my studies at the university. In the first phase of his rule, as part of his attempts to consolidate power, President Bashar al-Assad opened up the country in terms of technology and freedom of association. New ideas and discussions were part of university life, and those ideas included extremist ideologies that started to spring up in a previously closed and tightly controlled country. As with many students in Damascus, I was closely exposed to those discussions and ideologies.

During my studies at the university, the Iraq war also erupted in 2003. The war in Iraq impacted my hometown of Albu Kamal, which became a gateway for jihadis coming from across the region to enter Iraq. Two people from my village travelled to Iraq to join the jihadis in nearby places like Fallujah. I remember speaking to cab drivers about their

experience transporting would-be jihadis to Iraq through the borders not far from my village.

Events and changes in the 2000s were essential for understanding the Syrian conflict that began in 2011. The Syrian conflict marked a critical time in the broader story of Syria, and the rise of jihadism. It was in Syria where the main global jihadi organizations, al-Qaeda and ISIS, diverged and fought each other. The ideological wars between the two groups, and the future of jihadism more generally, could not be understood fully without in depth knowledge of the war in Syria. I followed these ideological wars very closely, both as a native Syrian and as a journalist and researcher.

My direct knowledge of Syria and the Middle East, as someone born and raised there, has been greatly enhanced by my extensive professional work, as well as extensive academic training.

After graduation from the University of Damascus in 2004, I worked as a freelancer for local media outlets and researchers on matters related to events in the Middle East. I travelled in 2006 to the U.K. to continue my education. I studied International Relations at the University of Nottingham, where I received a master's degree. During my studies in Nottingham, I received academic training relating to the Middle East and international politics and conflicts. Among the academic courses I studied were focused on philosophy of social research and religion, identity, and conflict in the Middle East.

I was working as a journalist in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011 and continued to work in journalism and research in the UAE until mid-2015. I wrote a weekly column at an English daily newspaper called The National, documenting major or key events in Syria and in the wider region. In addition to my personal knowledge of Syria and my immersion in the news, I interviewed various actors involved and / or affected by the Syrian conflict on a weekly, if not daily, basis. The people with whom I spoke ranged from ordinary Syrian civilians to militants, rebels and jihadis, on the one hand and from senior members to the rank and file in rebel and jihadist groups on the other.

Because of my writings at The National, I was approached by publications in Britain and the United States, among others, to write for them. I started writing frequently for a wide range of publications, including the New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Guardian, the Daily Beast, Financial Times and Politico. I also wrote research articles for several think-tank and academic publications, such as Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington D.C. and Chatham House and the European Council on Foreign Relations in London. I appeared on a wide range of television programs, including many flagship programs, such as the O'Reilly Factor, Amanpour and the Last

Word with Lawrence O'Donnell. In 2018, I was also named a Contributing Writer by The Atlantic magazine, a prestigious title awarded to a select number of writers.

In 2015, I published a book called *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts, New York). The book was co-authored with American journalist Michael Weiss, who asked me to write the book with him given my expertise on the subjects of jihadism and the Middle East. In the book, we interviewed former U.S. officials who worked on the ground in Iraq, including former colonels who once tracked and helped defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq in the mid to late-2000s. We also interviewed people who fought for ISIS and others who fought against it, as well as a range of actors who operated in Syria, including members of Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel groups. We also interviewed jihadist ideologues and clerics, as well as tribal leaders and regional actors involved in the country's conflict.

The book became a New York Times and Washington Post' Best Seller, and was translated into more than a dozen foreign languages, including Russian, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, Bosnian, French and Portuguese. The Wall Street Journal listed the book as one of their "10 Must-Read Books on the Evolution of Terrorism in the Middle East." The Times of London included it in their list of Best Books of 2015. The book was reviewed favorably in numerous newspaper articles and policy and academic journals, including twice by the New York Times. The Times' chief book critic, Michio Kakutani, said the book gave readers "a fine-grained look at the organization's evolution through assorted incarnations."

In mid-2015, I left the UAE to work as an associate fellow at the Chatham House in London, a fellowship awarded to recognized experts in their fields. Around the same time, I was offered a full-time job by a think-tank in Washington, D.C. After obtaining a visa six months later, I moved to the United States to start the job at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in January 2016, where I served as a Senior Fellow.

Since 2011, I have also testified before Congress on the issue of extremism and have briefed senior policymakers in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East on extremism. I conducted various training courses for military personnel, intelligence agencies, and diplomats specializing or operating in the Middle East, on Salafi-jihadism and tribal dynamics, which is discussed below, as well as other related issues. I also conducted training at the State Department's Foreign Services Institute for approximately two years.

In June 2016, I testified before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on the ideology of ISIS. In February 2017, I testified before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, on the issue of terrorism in Syria. In June 2020, I testified

before the The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria.

I am currently the editor in chief of Newlines Magazine, specializing in long-form journalism focusing on on-the-ground reportage, arguments and memoirs from the Middle East, the United States, and beyond. I was hired in 2019 by the Center for Global Policy, renamed later as Newlines Institute, to establish a program on non-state actors (primarily militant movements), based on my established expertise in this field. Within a year, I built a program, which featured some of the most recognized experts in the field, including the Iraqi expert Husham al-Hashimi, who had written for us frequently until the day he was assassinated by militants outside his home in Baghdad. Husham was one of the most informed voices on jihadism, especially in his country of Iraq. I then expanded the program in 2020 to the Human Security Unit, consisting of several programs dealing with anything from non-state actors to state fragility and security vacuums. Also, in 2020, I founded Newlines Magazine, which has since published an average of five essays a week, discussing political and cultural topics from various parts of the world, with a focus on the Middle East.

### **Jabhat al-Nusra / Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: The Political Context**

In 2011, popular uprisings swept the Middle East and North Africa. The uprisings reached many countries in the region through a domino effect that began in the North African country of Tunisia. The uprisings were assisted by the rise of social media and were organized largely by young people who demanded change from autocratic rule that dominated the region for a century to a form of democratic and representative politics. The Syrian uprising was part of this story, but the experiment led to a disaster because of how the regime of Bashar al-Assad reacted to the protests demanding change to a more democratic government, and later how extremists and foreign countries hijacked this popular movement for change.

One month after the start of demonstrations against his regime, the Tunisian president Zain Al Abidin Ben Ali abdicated his position and fled the country in January 2011 after 23 years in power. Trying to avoid the fate of Ben Ali's regime, the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak sent camels and mules to disrupt the youths' sit-in in Tahrir Square in Cairo in February 2011. As one Egyptian activist put it, "They are confronting Facebook and Twitter with camels and mules." These words captured the dilemma of the authoritarian Arab regimes vulnerable to real change that came to be known as the "Arab Spring." Mubarak was toppled in February 2011, followed by the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi in October of the same year.

In Syria, President Bashar Al Assad responded poorly to the popular demands. In a speech on March 31, 2011, he described the two-week-old peaceful demonstrations in

his country as a foreign “conspiracy,” vowing to abort it. Only he did not use camels and mules, but warplanes and missiles. The violent response to the uprising led to an all-out civil war by early 2012. As a result, the peaceful protesters of 2011 responded by fleeing or disappearing, surrendering, or taking up arms against the regime.

There is a sectarian aspect to the situation in Syria. The country, whose population is majority Sunni Muslims, has been ruled by a clan from the Alawite minority. Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current president, ruled the country from the 1970s until his death in 2000. But he also ruled with extreme brutality. By example, in response to an uprising in the 1970s and early 1980s, the father had launched a military campaign in multiple cities to quell the insurrection by force. That military response is still remembered for the destruction of Hama in central Syria in 1982. The son, Bashar, did the same after 2011, except on a much larger scale against a larger grassroots movement.

This sectarian dimension of the war would be exploited by the jihadists to establish themselves as a force within the broader uprising against the Assad regime, as I will explain later in this report.

The original Syrian protesters were encouraged by the fact that a portion of the Syrian army defected, in addition to growing foreign support for their cause. Officers and soldiers left their garrisons and joined angry local communities, especially in the restive rural part of the country, to fight back against the regime’s army. The regime committed horrible atrocities in 2012 and 2013, including the use of “barrel bombs” (explosives inside barrels, dropped from the air to residential areas) and chemical weapons against towns and neighborhoods that fell out of the regime’s control.

The brutal tactics of the regime were not enough to save it. It soon needed foreign support, which came initially from Iran. The Iranian regime deployed its infamous Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Lebanese Shiite organization Hezbollah in the fight as early as mid-2012. On the other hand, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), as the defected officers chose to call themselves, received support from Turkey and Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Not long after, the contrast between the Iranian militias that started to flood to Syria, and the dominantly Sunni rebel fighters in the FSA gave the Syrian revolution a sectarian imprint, specifically in 2013. This was the same year when Islamist and jihadist forces became the dominant on the rebel side.

The FSA did not have any specific ideology in the beginning. It was a general moniker for the collaboration between nationalistic officers and civil society activists who took up arms against the regime. These local forces were not well organized. Because of the



flow of Qatari and Saudi support in 2012, which included Islamic charities and individual donors, many FSA groups adopted Islamic names and narratives to attract donations. Some of these groups were influenced by the Wahhabi Salafi school, officially practiced in Saudi Arabia, and others were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the other hand, the Assad regime increasingly relied on Shiite militias who were brought to Syria by Iran. Syria, in 2013 in particular, became a battleground for a rare sectarian war between Shiite and Sunni militias. The Syrian revolution for freedom started to look more like a Sunni jihad versus Shiite Islam. When some secular FSA groups were careful to distance themselves from religious discourses, confirming that they were leading a cause for freedom, other Islamic groups such as the Army of Islam, Ahrar Al Sham, and Jabhat al-Nusra (or Nusra Front, or the Support Front) started to dominate because of the more organized and experienced militant movement of jihadism. The jihadists were more experienced fighters, and they soon won the war of competition over the rag-tag militias of the FSA in the battlefield. The jihadists deployed suicide bombers and inghimasi, or commando, fighters.

The United States and the international community in general backed the uprising, but were hesitant to offer full support to the rebels. There were concerns that the FSA was becoming more radicalized. Hundreds of jihadists and al-Qaeda members, long imprisoned by the Syrian regime in infamous prisons like the Sednaya Prison near Damascus, joined the rebels and formed the top echelon of what later became the most powerful rebel forces in the country (especially in 2013). They were joined by veteran jihadists who had previously fought in Afghanistan, Libya, Bosnia and Iraq.

### **The Rise of Jabhat al-Nusra / Hayat Tahrir al-Sham**

Jihadists came to Syria early on, around mid-2011, but they established themselves as a dominant force gradually over many years of war. According to the jihadists' own materials, they saw an opportunity in the popular uprising against Assad. In an interview with al-Jazeera, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, said he had little hope in any change in Syria before the uprising took place. When young Syrians rebelled against the Assad regime, a small group of al-Qaeda in Iraq smuggled themselves into Syria to form a branch for the group there. This group was led by a Syrian jihadist known as Abu Muhammad Al Jolani.

Jolani was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1982, and his real name is Ahmad Hussein Al Shari'e. His family came from the Golan Heights (hence the nom de guerre, Jolani from Golan) to Damascus in 1967 after the area fell to Israel. Jolani spent the first seven

years of his life in Saudi Arabia before his family returned to Damascus and lived in the Mezze Eastern Villas neighborhood. Sometime after 2003, he travelled to Iraq and joined the fight against the United States.-led coalition, under the command of the founder of what is known today as ISIS, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi.

Jolani was arrested in Iraq in 2006 and jailed for several years in prisons including Camp Bucca. While in prison, Jolani got to know many of those who would lead the Islamic State in Iraq, until 2011 when Jolani was released from prison and sent by the Islamic State in Iraq into Syria to establish a franchise for the group in Syria. In January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra announced itself publicly as a jihadist group that was fighting against the Assad regime. The group's name in Arabic comes from the word "to assist" or "to support", hence the moniker the Support Front.

Jabhat al-Nusra, as it announced itself in January 2012, was a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq, but secretly until the spring of 2013. Before it announced its affiliation to al-Qaeda, the group acted as a Syrian group of veteran jihadists and sought to entrench itself in the anti-government rebel landscape and present itself as a legitimate part of the anti-Assad popular cause, without the perceived negatives of outward affiliation with al-Qaeda (knowing affiliation with the terrorist group would cause many to not support it, because of its extremism and because it would harm the legitimate popular cause against the Syrian dictatorship).

The group quickly built a presence throughout the country, by focusing its attacks on government forces, facilities and officials. The group followed different tactics from other rebel and jihadist forces. Instead of controlling territories and governing as a group in areas outside of government control, it focused on attacking the regime and infiltrating local structures. The group also built a mobile army of militants conducting hit-and-run and surgical attacks. The group sought to attract recruitment by presenting itself as focusing on fighting the Assad regime and by doing so effectively through suicide bombing and fanatical fighters willing to die on the frontlines. This strategy was one of the main factors that led many to join the group. While other groups were seen as linked to local or foreign agendas, the group was seen as committed to the jihadist cause against a sectarian regime.

The group also had ideologues and clerics who supplemented the military fight with online and on-the-ground propaganda efforts. They connected with social and religious leaders, distributed propaganda materials to local citizens, used English language magazines such as Inspire and Dabiq to attract foreign recruits, preached at mosques, ran online accounts to push their propaganda online, and provided interviews to journalists in the region. They also worked closely with rebel groups that shared their worldviews, a way to embed themselves within the rebels and benefit from their resources. They directly or indirectly benefited from the flow of foreign funding through



such joint efforts with the rebels, and through charities and rich donors operating in the country or in the region.

By the spring of 2013, jihadists were prominent actors in the Syrian conflict, and inter-jihadist competition reached a high point. A split occurred between the Syrian organization and its Iraqi patron, "al-Qaeda in Iraq", which was officially known as the Islamic State of Iraq. The split happened after the Iraqi group announced the previously secret links between the two organizations and decided to merge the two under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Syrian group rejected the unification and decided to pledge its allegiance directly to al-Qaeda's central leadership under Ayman al-Zawahiri. The split also polarized and divided jihadists in Syria, with some joining the Syrian branch and others joining the Iraqi one, which then became known as ISIS, or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The jihadist infighting was a key event in 2013, accompanied with jihadist attempts to dominate the scene by force, including attacks on Islamist and local Syrian groups. The infighting was thus highly publicized, which caused many actors inside and outside the country (such as funders, sympathizers, and recruits) to pick sides. The ideologies, previously kept under the table or underplayed, had now become clear.

The differences became even more pronounced when al-Qaeda's central leadership issued statements ordering the Iraqi and Syrian sides to stick to their respective countries of operations -- ISIS to Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra to Syria -- to mitigate the fighting. The Iraqi group rejected the proposal, especially since it had succeeded in attracting a large number of the foreign jihadists operating in Syria. Fighting erupted between the two groups.

Non-jihadist rebel groups joined the fight against ISIS and drove it from most of the country by early 2014. Around that time, Jabhat al-Nusra was heavily present in two main parts of Syria. The first was in Deir Ezzor, where I was raised, and the second is northwestern Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra was also present in southwestern Syria, but the east and north were more important: the north for movement of fighters and money through Turkey in the north, and the east because of the oilfields in Deir Ezzor and elsewhere. Most of Syria's oil and gas output is concentrated in eastern Syria, and Jabhat al-Nusra, as ISIS did later, made large amounts of money from the control of these resources.

Since Jabhat al-Nusra was a dominant force in Deir Ezzor from 2012 to mid-2014, I watched the group closely through my family, relatives, and contacts on the ground, in addition to watching and reading the news. I knew about many of its rank and file members, and those who worked with the group. Over the years, I interviewed many of its members and some of its senior leaders. I also wrote about its religious ideology,

based on exclusive insights obtained from inside the group, through members and locals who had access to their indoctrination materials.

Jabhat al-Nusra, along with other forces, controlled the oil fields and participated in the governance of Deir Ezzor until the summer of 2014, when the situation in rebel-controlled parts of Syria took a turn. That summer, ISIS seized large parts of Iraq and launched campaigns to expand into Syria. Within a few weeks, ISIS gained control of almost half of Syria -- mostly in eastern Syria -- as well as around one third of Iraq. Jabhat al-Nusra, previously a dominant group in eastern Syria, was pushed to the southwest and northwest regions of Syria.

The group rebranded itself multiple times, but its leadership remained largely the same. On April 10, 2013, Jolani gave fealty to al-Qaeda. On July 28, 2016, Jolani rebranded his group as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the Front for the Conquest of Syria). During this brief phase, the group was nominally led by the leader of one of the rebel groups that joined the new coalition, named Hashem Al Sheikh, who was merely a nominal not the *de facto* leader of the coalition, while Jolani served as the coalition's military commander (the group that was Jabhat al-Nusra, within the coalition, remained under Jolani's control). On January 28, 2017, the group joined other groups and rebranded itself once again as Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS, Organization for the Liberation of the Levant).

Jolani remained the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra throughout the various phases of rebranding that the group went through from 2011 to the present, and despite the changes in its aliases and the shifting allegiance from ISIS to al-Qaeda. The brief selection of another figure to head a coalition was part of the rebranding exercise (to appear inclusive). Indeed, some of the group's key leadership remained the same throughout the years, except if they were killed in action or if they defected to more extreme groups.

Jabhat al-Nusra was established with funds from al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its former Iraqi patron was said, by both groups, to have shared its resources with the newly established franchise in Syria in 2011. But the group would become one of the richest groups in Syria, as the fighting expanded in the country and as resources fell in the hands of the anti-government rebels.

"Spoils of war" was the main way Jabhat al-Nusra funded itself, aside from the initial funding from Iraqi jihadists. The group would offer rebel groups to participate in battles against the Assad regime in exchange for a large share in the captured war spoils, such as weapons and ammunition. The rebels sought to develop its fighting skills, which they gained from jihadi battlefields elsewhere, and Jabhat al-Nusra needed the rebel resources to expand its operation. The group also relied on other methods to gain resources, including ransom and extortion, to capture oil fields. In the four three years,

Jabhat al-Nusra did not establish a civilian body or act as a civilian government in areas that fell out of the Syrian regime's control, so it relied on extortion. For example, the group would stop trucks and demand a fee; it would ask charities to support the "mujahideen" (holy fighters); and it would compel small fighting factions to share resources they had from foreign or local funders.

Rather than provide support to ordinary Syrians, the group sometimes diverted resources that people needed to survive for its own use. The group confiscated medical supplies, ambulances, bakeries, and even clothes. Humanitarian groups and legitimate charities operating on the ground were among the victims of the group's extortion efforts. Later, in 2017, HTS established the "Syrian Salvation Government" and started to impose taxes on charities and businesses. Charities were compelled by HTS to pay between 20% and 50% of received aid to the HTS-backed entity.

As Jabhat al-Nusra became dominant in much of Syria after 2012, it began to informally share resources with other rebel groups. But it did not focus on capturing territory and governing as a formal body. Instead, it focused on fighting the Assad regime and in the process dominating the scene. It fought in most major battles across the country. Alongside its fighting and money-making activities, the group also sought to weaken other factions, especially moderate ones that aligned themselves with Western nations. In some cases, it dismantled them by force. With time, and as the rebels retreated or were defeated in most of Syria, Jolani's group became one of the most powerful jihadist groups active in the region.

### **Radicalization in Syria**

There is a wide range of jihadist groups that came to life in the Syrian conflict, starting with the pro-Muslim Brotherhood moderate Islamic factions and ending in ISIS; a group whose ultra-extremist ideology is unique in the whole of Islamic history.

In the beginning of 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood adopted and supported some FSA groups in rebel-held territories. The involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood with FSA culminated in the birth of "Kataeb Durou'a al Thawra," or "the Revolution Shield Battalions," and "Farouk Battalions." While still acting under the name of FSA, Durou'a and Farouk were considered moderate Islamic factions that might eventually blend with Islamic project of the Muslim Brotherhood who considered the Syrian conflict as a chance to reach power in Syria.

Extremism in the Syrian conflict developed gradually, starting with local groups backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the rise of Salafist groups by Gulf states and funders, and then finally by the dominance of groups linked to al-Qaeda. Hundreds of armed groups emerged in Syria over the years, many of which either disappeared or

weakened, while groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, who benefited from their long experience that predated the conflict, were able to survive.

The two groups proved resilient due to the commitment of their supporters and their ability to learn and adapt to the changing circumstances. In the case of Jabhat al-Nusra, it survived the split with ISIS because it was able to adapt: first by pledging an oath of allegiance, not to the Iraqi jihadists who established it, but al-Qaeda's central leadership; and later by rebranding itself as a local rebel group with no affiliation to a global jihadist entity, though it was still operating decidedly and openly as a jihadist group, when ISIS started to lose its territory as a result of the U.S.-led campaign against it. The name change also happened as pressure against the Syrian rebels increased because of the Russian-led campaigns in Aleppo and other parts of the country. The rebel losses forced it to present a more moderate outlook, outwardly, to gain support from regional countries like Turkey.

The internet was important for jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra to help gain foreign support. Jihadist groups attracted fighters and received resources from outside the country based on their ideologies, which became unmistakably clear in 2013 as the scene became more polarized and each side emphasized their differences to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Jihadists could easily be distinguished from Islamists, and certainly from ordinary groups, even if these groups had a conservative religious focus. Because jihadism is a distinct ideology and movement, in a highly polarizing context such as the Syrian conflict, its differences became even clearer and more pronounced as each jihadist group naturally sought to emphasize its differences or uniqueness from that of its competitors.

There are several factors that allowed these jihadist groups to gain influence in Syria. First, the Assad regime decided to respond to its people's demands for freedom by waging a ferocious war against the people. In war, courage alone is not enough to motivate fighters. Hatred becomes a fuel for the fight. Many Muslim Sunnis, who constitute the majority in Syria, viewed the government as a regime controlled by the Alawite Muslim minority sect. Their view was reinforced when the Assad army launched relentless and discriminatory military campaigns in 2011 and 2012, which was seen as an annihilation war against the Sunni majority. From this perspective, average Sunni Syrians were a fertile ground for radical ideologies that would soon take advantage of the atrocities to attract recruits across the country.

Second, the perceived inaction of the international community led many average Syrians, who had expected support for their pro-democracy demands, to believe that the West, as a whole, did not care about their survival because they were Muslims. They developed feelings of abandonment and betrayal as they had sought to promote Western values of freedom, human dignity and democracy, which did not gain the

support of the West. These bitter feelings caused many Syrians to welcome and join jihadist groups, who were effective on the battlefield, while secular rebels became increasingly weaker over time.

Third, the Assad regime capitalized on the growing religious sentiments by fueling these sentiments through violence and counter-measures in order to further radicalize the popular uprising and gain the support of more Syrians who were fearful of radicals. The Alawites, as a religious minority, thus felt under attack by the Sunni majority, and stuck with Assad. This process would also serve to convince more in the West that a rebel victory would turn Syria into a jihadist nightmare. One of the most cited measures that the Assad regime undertook was to release hundreds of proven radicals from Sednaya Prison and remote rural areas to enable radicals to radicalize the uprising, while focusing attacks on moderate rebel groups.

Fourth, Iraq, as a turbulent neighbor of Syria, played a significant role in the rise of jihadism in the Syrian conflict. The two most dominant extremist groups today, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, came to Syria from Iraq. The Sunnis of Iraq had been under sectarian pressure by the Iranian influence in their country since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Many angry Sunni jihadists in Iraq saw the Syrian conflict as an "opportunity." They crossed the border into Syria not only with their weapons, but with their sectarian mentality, in order to eradicate the Assad regime as an Alawite ally to the Shiite regimes in Iraq and Iran.

Finally, Iran contributed greatly to the rise of Sunni jihadism in Syria. Iran saw the Syrian conflict as a chance to consolidate its influence in Syria and the wider region. It deployed dozens of Shiite militias from various countries, led by IRGC operatives, to support the Assad regime. Deployment of Shiite militias, whose members were sectarian and fanatical, further weakened moderate and democratic voices in Syria and gave the upper hand to jihadists who presented themselves as the defenders of Sunnism in the country.

These factors shaped the attitudes of mainly local fighters. Foreign fighters and sympathizers were also generally attracted by the jihadist ideology. Muslims outside Syria would still recognize the local dynamics and the need to support Syrians, but ideology tends to play a more significant factor in why outsiders support certain jihadist groups on the ground. This has to do with an ideology with roots that predate the Syrian conflict by decades.

### **History of Jihadism and Key Concepts**

Jihadism, to be distinguished from jihad, is a relatively recent ideology. It is a product of the interplay between the revolutionary political ideas of Islamism and the fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic text by Salafism. Islamism and Salafism arose earlier.

Salafism, better known as Wahhabism, is the intellectual legacy of the 13-century Islamic scholar Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah and the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, as interpreted and enforced by Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his successors in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Salafism, as practiced in what is today known as Saudi Arabia, is better known as Wahhabism after its founder. It was founded in the 18th century in the Arabian Peninsula. The rise of this movement was enabled by an alliance between its founder and a member of the Al Saud family, who together formed Saudi Arabia. With the discovery of oil in the 1930s and 1940s, the Saudi-Wahhab alliance had at its disposal unlimited resources to spread the ideology beyond Arabia. Clerics and officials began to fund mosques, schools, universities, media, and so on, across the world to promote their rigid and fundamentalist brand of Islam.

Around the same time, another movement was taking root across the Islamic world. Political Islam, with roots in India, Pakistan, and Egypt, is an ideology for political change to insert Islam and religion as a central part of the public life. Islamism, as it is also known, was central to the formation of Pakistan as an Islamic country, after partition from India in 1947. The ideology had also manifested itself in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, founded by a school teacher named Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Islamism, as an idea, spread in many countries, formed local branches, and even entered into parliaments in some countries. Unlike jihadism later, the Muslim Brotherhood called for change through a two-fold strategy: grassroots change from the bottom up that developed from groups of individuals in local areas coming together as a “family” and connecting with other families through a hierarchical system within a larger organization; and peaceful political change through political participation and organization. Political Islam became even more popular with the failure of pan-Arabism and the defeat of Arab regimes at the hand of Israel in what is known as the 1967 Six-Day War.

The defeat, dubbed the Naksa (or Setback) by Arabs across the region, led to mass disillusionment with Arab regimes that previously relied on rhetoric to bring all Arab countries together through a pan-Arab ideology. This gave space for Islamism to grow. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was toppled, and an Islamic revolution replaced his secular system. Jihadist volunteers also traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to participate in the fight against the Soviets, who invaded the country in 1979 -- the same year as the Iranian revolution. The Islamist wave would sweep the region and produce more extreme incarnations of existing ideologies.

Salafism is marked by extreme traditionalism and literalism. Political Islam is marked by revolutionary ideas for political change. Islamists fleeing repression in countries like



Egypt, Syria, and Iraq would find refuge in the Persian Gulf. There, they would be influenced by local Salafism, and Salafists would be influenced by Islamist ideas. The result is a slow hybridization between doctrinaire Salafism and other Islamist currents, which gives rise to Salafi-jihadism or jihadism, a more extreme and violent variation of either Salafism or Islamism.

Islamists like Sayyid Qutb and Anwar al-Awlaqi have been influenced by this process of hybridization, which involves the pursuit of an Islamic state to bring down the current political system and impose a distinct set of interpretations of how Islam should govern public life. The result of this interplay is a movement known as Salafi-jihadism. Within this broad movement of Salafi-jihadism, various actors can endorse varying degrees of extremism and violence that are different from normative Islam practiced by the vast number of Muslims in the world.

### **How Jihadists Indoctrinate Followers**

Salafi-jihadists often use concepts and ideas shared by traditional Muslims, but they have different interpretations of these concepts. One example is the use of the word tawhid, or monotheism. Islam considers itself a continuation of a long line of divinely revealed religions, often known as the Abrahamic religions, but it emphasizes the purity or truth of its message by promoting the idea of monotheism -- that there is only one God. A key theologian that Salafists rely on is the aforementioned 13-century Ibn Taymiyya, who developed the criteria for adherence to tawhid/monotheism: belief in God, belief in no other besides God (it is not enough to believe in God, but one must also reject other deities), and to have the right creed. These criteria were not defined by theologians before him. In the mid-20th century, Islamist thinkers emphasized another criterion that also was uncommon before then: to adhere to monotheism, they demanded that a Muslim must believe in the sovereignty of God and his laws. This meant that belief in sharia law and rejection of man-made laws became a matter of core belief. If a Muslim does not believe that he must be governed by God's laws, and only God's laws, he cannot be considered a true Muslim. So, even if the word monotheism, or tawhid, is a core Muslim concept, it means something different to jihadists like al-Qaeda and ISIS. This is why Muslims, both Sunnis and Shia, refer to these jihadist groups as takfiris (those who practice takfir, or excommunication, against fellow Muslims).

The kind of ideas such groups believe in often lead Muslims to think of them as new sects, regardless of the familiarity of the concepts they use to justify their practices. These groups have specific understanding of words like bid'ah (innovation in or deviation from normative Islam); wala wal bara (loyalty to Islam and disavowal of un-Islamic ways); tawhid (the oneness of God); shirk (polytheistic practices); kafir (apostate or infidel); jahiliyya (pre-Islamic obliviousness); hakimiyya (sovereignty of God and his

laws); taghut (false deity); hijra (migration); rabat (guarding borders); hadith (sayings and traditions of Prophet Mohammed). They have their own set of criteria for what makes a person a believer or not, such as nawaqid al-Islam, or nullifiers of Islam.

In terms of indoctrination, jihadists also rely on the military history of Islam and the wars fought by Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors, who tend to be held in high regard by most Muslims. They rely on what is known as kutb al-sira, the books of the prophet's biography, which tend to focus on wars in early Islam. The Sealed Nectar is one such book. That book is widely studied by Muslims, but as part of a broader list of books and materials to provide a context for such stories. Jihadists tend to focus on distributing and recommending such books because, taught in isolation, these books can shape the thinking of new recruits that war and jihad is a central part of Islam. It is a question of emphasis and selectiveness, a method jihadists use in prison settings to indoctrinate followers. In formal education, Muslims learn other aspects of the religion, such as reading the scripture, learning about morality, studying asbab al-nuzool, or the context of each verse. Jihadists, however, focus on war, and learn check lists of what make a Muslim a believer or otherwise.

Jihadists also like to focus on manuals and roadmaps, as shorthand to radicalize Muslims. *Milestones*, by Egyptian Islamist intellectual Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966 after being accused of plotting to assassinate the then-president Gamal Abdelnasser, is one example. In that book, Qutb draws a roadmap for Islamic radicals to establish an Islamic state, based on a set of principles and actions that include rejecting the foundations of modern states, the legitimacy of existing governments and governance system, and the need for the return to the very beginnings of Islam in the 7th century to re-establish supremacy over the world.

Stories from early Islamic history (often from the period known as the Apostasy Wars, which followed Prophet Muhammad's death) are also cited by jihadists to justify beheading, crucifixion, mass killing, and similarly brutal practices to new members.

Despite their influence, Salafism and Islamism represent small circles in the broader Islamic context. They represent relatively recent movements that base their concepts or ideas on the broader religion of Islam. Jihadism or Salafi-jihadism are even narrower circles that base their ideologies on the relatively narrow legacies of Salafism and Islamism.

The merging of Islamism and Salafism produces a more clearly defined religion-based political ideology, often called Salafi-jihadism, that typically endorses violence (or jihad) as a tool for change. The overlap between Salafism and Islamism becomes starker depending on the degree to which a person is influenced by the more rigid aspects of the broader ideologies of Salafism and Political Islam. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and some less

violent jihadist groups belong to a smaller ideological group of Salafi-jihadism. These concepts are further depicted on the attached diagram to my report.

In other words, these ideologies are more specific manifestations or variations that diverge from the Islam practiced by ordinary Muslims around the world.

### **Examples of Other Individuals and Groups Operating in Syria**

Hundreds of armed groups and rebel leaders emerged in the Syrian context over the years. Much in their legacies explain the intricacies of jihadism and its context.

Zahrar Alloush is a cleric born in Douma in the east of Damascus in 1971. He was a Salafi cleric influenced by his father, also a cleric based in Saudi Arabia. Released from Sednaya prison in 2011, Alloush soon joined the fight against the regime and established the Army of Islam in Douma, near Damascus, in 2011, at first named the Brigade of Islam, which was rebranded later as the Army of Islam as it grew. The Army of Islam received Saudi support and adhered to Salafism. For several years, Alloush was the biggest threat to the regime on the outskirts of Damascus. He was killed by a Russian air strike in December 2015.

Hassan Abboud was born in Hama in 1978. He was a Salafi Muslim from Sahl Al Ghab Valley in western Hama. He was a graduate of English literature who ended up in Sednaya prison in 2007 for his extremist Islamic views. After he was released from prison in 2011, Abboud met Khaled Abu Anas from Saraqeb in Idlib and agreed to establish an Islamic group that mixes al-Qaeda's fighting experience with the pragmatic ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. He established Ahrar Al Sham Islamic Movement (or Ahrar al-Sham for short) in 2011. Between 2011 and 2014, Ahrar Al Sham was the most important jihadist group in the north of Syria. Abboud died in an explosion in September 2014.

Abu Basir Al Tartusi, whose real name is Abdulmunem Halima, is a jihadist cleric and ideologue born in Tartus in 1959. Tartusi joined the Islamic insurgency against the regime of Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s and 1980s and fled Syria in 1981 after the defeat of the uprising. Tartusi travelled to Afghanistan and met the famous jihadist leader Abdullah Azzam. In 1987, he travelled to Jordan where he wrote his book "Rules of Takfir (Rules of Excommunication)." He then moved to Yemen and spent three years there before moving to London. Tartusi visited Syria during the uprising and was seen accompanying rebel forces in Aleppo and Latakia in 2012.

Hashem Al Sheikh, also known as Abu Jaber, is a jihadist leader and a cleric born in Aleppo in 1968. Al Sheikh was the deputy of the famous Syrian cleric Mahmoud Qul Aghasi (Abu Al Qaqaa). In 2003, while working for Abu Al Qaqaa, Al Sheikh assisted Syrian and Arab fighters travel to Iraq through Syria with the encouragement of the

Assad regime. He was arrested in 2005 and jailed in Sednaya prison. Al Sheikh was released in 2011 and joined Ahrar al-Sham. He became the commander of Ahrar al-Sham after the killing of Hassan Abboud in 2014. Sheikh was chosen as the first nominal leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Abu Khaled Al Suri was born in Aleppo in 1963. Al Suri participated in the Islamic insurgency of the 1980s. He fled Syria after the failure of the insurgency to join jihadist efforts in other Islamic countries. Al Suri fought in Afghanistan and accompanied Osama Bin Laden. He then joined the jihad in Chechnya and was close to the famous Saudi jihadist, Emir Khattab. Afterward, he returned to Iraq and joined Zarqawi in his war against the United States. He was arrested by the Americans in Pakistan in 2005. Al Suri spent one year in prison in Pakistan before being delivered to Syria where he spent five years in Sednaya prison. In December 2011, Al Suri was released. He joined Ahrar al-Sham and became the spiritual leader of the group and its military commander in Aleppo. Ayman Al Zawahiri, head of al-Qaeda, chose Al Suri as a judge to examine the disputes between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al Suri was assassinated in Aleppo in February 2014. Ahrar al-Sham accused ISIS of killing him.

Abu Musab Al Suri was born in Aleppo in 1958. His real name is Mustafa Sit Maryam. Al Suri is a cleric and a scholar who wrote 14 books, most of which are about jihad and his personal experiences in Afghanistan during the jihad there. His influence is key to understanding some of the groups that operated in Syria after 2011, and in Iraq before that. His books were popular in the Syrian jihadist circles. In 1991, he travelled to Britain. In 2005, he was arrested by the Americans in Pakistan. He was deported to Syria and imprisoned. Some jihadists think he was executed by the Assad regime, while others believe he is still alive in prison in Syria.

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